

LOST IN THE NOT-SO-FUNHOUSE: SUBVERSIVE THREADS IN THE MEDIEVAL NARRATIVE LABYRINTH

E. L. Ridsen

Plenary Address, 22nd Annual Meeting of the Medieval Association
of the Midwest, University of Puerto Rico at Mayaguez,
January 2007

In a famous Zen koan a student asks a master, "What is happiness?" The master replies, "Grandfather dies, father dies, son dies." Surprised, the student asks how such a scenario can comprise happiness, when everyone is dying. The master responds that the best we can ever hope is that events follow a natural, orderly pattern: if father dies before grandfather or son before father, that's tragedy; death, inevitable, looms, so we can only hope that it takes us in proper order and at an appropriate time.

With the succinctness of a proper koan, that story suggests that we intuit a natural sense of fabular or narrative order and that we depend on that order to understand our world and tolerate the vagaries of life. Koans, products of Buddhist meditative practice and often of ascetic discipline, act as a lens that enlarges an exactness of perception. But while I venerate that tradition, I don't hail from it. In most of our stories, at least in the West, we prefer elaboration and entanglement, an intricate, even knotty weave that we can *untangle*, learning and enjoying as we go. Separating the threads opens the complexities of character and experience; examining warp and weft confirms or unravels our assumptions or expectations of our place in the universe or, as science fiction fans may say, multiverse. Postmodern stories, fully unbraided, even suffering the cool incisions of the surgical eye, seldom *confirm*; instead, they scald, freeze-dry, deconstruct, lay bare or complicate every hidden hint of possible personality to unsettle our perspective and bejangle our lethargies.

Risden

Not always so: past ages have often lived if not breathed stories that recapitulate limited but publicly accepted notions of the right and true—we of course would never give in to such “simplicities.” Historically narratives have taken forms fitting their time, just as they’ve exploited themes central to their time. But stories share at least one trait: they have always subverted. By ripped-bodice passion, face-slapping satire, or even occasionally hoist with their own petar, and despite Wimsattian and Beardsleyan argument, stories trope their way to some Horatian purpose. Even if that purpose lies in our contemporary obsessively psychoanalytic unraveling of every conceivable pleasure and suffering, turning viewers into little Saurons who seek and exploit the weaknesses of others characters, our fictions have reasons: they thrash, trash, confess, upbraid, warn, eviscerate, repair, titillate, lampoon, but largely by unstitching rather than suturing.

Consider please the notion of a story that doesn’t *subvert*, that never turns under or aside, that encourages no alternative versions or interpretations. Even allegory subverts: it turns the literal story beneath the implied one, the meaning taking greater importance because it forms the interpretive goal of the former. Consider rather a story that presses ahead like a perpetual motion machine through perfect episodes to a perfect end. Let’s try one. A child is born to middle-class but hard working, god-fearing, kind and appreciative parents; she shows many talents, excelling in school, sports, and church choir, but without becoming arrogant or dweebish; she earns PhDs in physics and philosophy, wins teaching awards at an Ivy-League university, publishes a Pulitzer-Prize-winning book, invents a means to pulverize deadly asteroids, marries a handsome, witty, and successful physician, has two lovely children whom she accepts as they are and nurtures to their own successes; she retires to become a philanthropist and ambassador to a politically and economically troubled country, advises them as they set themselves in order, retires again to write what P. G. Wodehouse would call “improving books” for children and to tend her aging friends; at age 102 she passes away in her sleep leaving a large, loving family, thousands of friends and admirers, and a body of work that rivals Shakespeare’s for its beauty and understanding of the

Risden

human condition. Ta-dah. What would we do with a story like that? Would we like or admire it? Would we read it at all?

Our sample story, lacking subversion, also lacks any real human interest. Many of us may want to live such a story, but it hardly draws us *as a story*. Even koans imply a subversive element: they rip the rug from underneath, or even throw the trap door that holds us up, or pull the curtains from the window, exposing how in our common darkness we cling to absurdities that themselves subvert our ability to see clearly.

Subversion makes a story. Unlacing and re-lacing the threads make the reading experience meaningful and bring the pleasure. As Walt Whitman wrote, don't we just feel so good when we understand a difficult poem? Many of us love mystery novels; mysteries hinge on subversions, each twist and clue subverting the narrative from one likely solution toward another. Each possible solution dictates a subversion of the real story until the clues build to the true conclusion. Subversion creates the pleasure of finding a solution. In a joke, subversion creates the incongruity that allows for the punch line. Solving a mystery creates a pleasure akin to discovering a punch line: it ties the incongruities into well-knitted and acceptable whole, raising the actual solution to public view while letting the sub-versions sink away—except perhaps in a really good mystery, where their implications remain to haunt the apparently true solution.

We're here, of course, to consider the tapestry of medieval narrative, but I hope you'll forgive me if I subvert that discussion a bit longer to thread a theoretical web that may help when we get there. Contemporary narratology allows consideration of any art forms that recount or express a series of events, though Aristotle separates narrated events, as in epic, from an imitation of events, as in drama; he uses the term *μυθος* to mean simply the arrangement of incidents. If we extend our notion of *story*—narratologists often prefer the term *fabula* to express "a series of logically and chronologically related events" (Bal 5) or a "semiotic representation of a series of events meaningfully connected in temporal and causal ways" (Onega and Landa 3)—to any art form that creates, recounts, displays, or implies a series of steps that comprise an integrated and recognizable sequence, we may reasonably

bring drama, film, music, and even visual art into consideration. But even such a simple notion of “sequence of events” can create problems, not only with postmodern theory and fiction, but more especially with medieval narrative: allegory uses events not for their own sake, but because of other events they parallel; tropological reading subsumes events beneath moral import; anagogical reading begins as intertextuality, but subsumes literary text beneath apocalyptic *interpretation* of biblical text. Medieval “fictions” aren’t metafiction; they’re fables recalling attention to a fixed notion of an interpreted higher reality. Medieval *realistic* stories self-deconstruct before the ultimate aporia, the chasm of *transitory life*; they leave us fragments, sub-narratives, *narremes*, free of the need to make Gérard Genette’s distinction between homodiegetic and heterodiegetic narrative: the narrator always participates in the narrative, as do the audience, because of the inescapably didactic and eternally present nature of the referent texts. Allegory is, in a sense, always with us, not just in medievalia; J. Hillis Miller calls the constant displacement from one sign to the next *allegory*: “Narrative is the allegorizing along a temporal line of this perpetual displacement from immediacy. . . . [It] expresses the impossibility of expressing unequivocally, and so dominating, what is meant by writing” (292). But the medieval world, while finding the process of storymaking allegorical, believed in the *supernarrative* that it created, in its real presence, and only the narrative thread need be present to invoke the whole in its wholeness and permanence. Medieval notions of allegory extended necessarily to all genres that allowed representation of incidents.

So before I tend to medieval tales—later I’ll have something to say about *Beowulf*, *The Quest of the Holy Grail*, the Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and *Piers Plowman*—I’ll make a few brief points about art, music, and film, so that we may look at some narrative *bytes* from alternative media, incident motifs that begin the building process for constructible or deconstructible stories. We’ll also pause to examine briefly some significantly subverted narratives from different literary periods. I’d like to suggest that the kinds of subversions we find in narratives and the themes to which they lead us reflect and express the peculiarities of

perception or the reigning thematic concerns of the ages from which they come. Subversions turn simple plots into tapestries, but sometimes phantasmagoric ones—they may lead us to harrowing places in our intellectual and spiritual lives. Medieval narrative subversions tend to focus, not surprisingly, on the instability of human virtue and the necessity for vigilance in the face of both physical and spiritual corruption: in case you've been wondering, that's my thesis today. And with respect to the "funhouse" in my title, audiences, like John Barth's character Ambrose in his kaleidoscopic short story "Lost in the Funhouse," may well find the fantastic world of the subverted narrative a "place of fear and confusion" (69). Medieval tales, while not Barthian metafiction, yet exhibit in their layering an awareness of fiction as fiction and a desire to challenge simple interpretation and vary perceptions.

But let's back up now to consider some visual art. The works I've included show us how visual artists have exploited narrative subversions no less than have storytellers.

First and perhaps most famous among my examples, Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) displays the most violent of subversions: what Frank Russell calls "the world's first experiment in full-scale saturation bombing" (2), the annihilation of the "sacred town" of the Basques by the Spanish Republic in 1937. The bombing subverted an agreement whereby the Republic had granted Basque independence. Combining elements of cubism, surrealism, and primitivism, the painting depicts fragmentation with a shocking immediacy: a subversion of ideas of order, center, anatomy, humanity. While the painting visually narrates the story of the bombing, it tears narrative to fragments, barely readable narremes of light, body parts, and screams.

Next, Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* (1912) implies rather than interrupts narrative. Also joining cubism and surrealism, this painting takes the expectation of a realistic, perhaps even titillating figure caught in mid-step as it descends toward the viewer and turns it instead into an artistic metaphor of a Riemann sum. Yet the increments of movement displayed synchronically and syntagmatically are undercut by their own metallic quality: the painting displays mechanical, not organic movement—one can almost

hear it clank. The artist subverts the idea of the nude moving, perhaps toward a sexual encounter, by focusing not on the nude as such, but on the idea of movement as comprising discrete yet sequential steps. The idea of increment replaces the narrative of descent and subverts speculation about what may follow the descent.

Third, Jan van Eyck's *Chancellor Rolin Madonna* (c. 1435) subverts two narratives simultaneously by means of its diachronic halves: the Chancellor, the sort of person our time would describe as a "control freak," anachronistically meets the Madonna, who has been miraculously translated to Nicolas Rolin's palace. However, the painting also subverts its own interpretation: urged to see the Chancellor as worthy of audience with the Virgin Mary, and of a benediction from the blond Christ-child himself, we see him also as sufficiently arrogant to want himself placed in her presence. He doesn't even look astonished to see her; rather, he gazes intently, almost critically—Anita Albus calls it "a touch of impatience" (15)—as a diminished angel begins to crown her. "Rolin wanted to present an immaculate image of his own sanctity to an ungrateful world" (24), Albus explains: his presence subverts any likely Madonna narrative, and his visage undermines the self-created narrative he wished the painter to display.

Fourth, *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (c.1558), by Pieter Breughel the Elder, subverts the story of Icarus' death by showing everyone else going about his business and paying the event no notice. W. H. Auden's famous poem "Musee des Beaux Arts" elaborates the emotional impact of this or any such scene. Those persons in the vicinity of the event don't allow this unbelievable—in fact mythic—occurrence to subvert their purposes. A casual glance might not even turn up the Icarus figure. A seminal mythic figure thus becomes a relatively insignificant sub-version of the mutually human experience of death, which the plowman, shepherd, fisherman, and sailors would rather simply ignore: they don't want their day subverted by iconic images of imminent demise.

Fifth, Piero della Francesca's marvelous *The Flagellation of Christ* (c. 1469) foregrounds characters who go about their own casual conversation without apparently even noticing the horrible act that is

taking place just behind them. Perhaps for them such torture occurs every day, and so this event is only a sub-version of the natural course of life and no subversion of their day's activities—even Jesus's common pose reinforces that reading. Yet backgrounded though we find it, we know the event's greater significance. In Christian terms the Crucifixion to follow will cast all other events into the realm of mere types, sub-versions of cosmological crises. Curiously, too, the man who attends the flagellation appears as either Pilate or the Byzantine emperor or both; the men in the foreground may have associations with the defense of Byzantium or with Urbino politics, or the middle figure may represent an angel moderating conflict between East and West (Deimling 270, 273)—such identifications lead down different narrative and interpretive paths. And of course the whole painting creates time disjunction or anachronism: the characters in front don't belong with those in back, the costumes don't match the time, and the lighting in the right and left sides of the scene suggest different times of day. The whole painting has invited varying interpretations or sub-readings.

Finally, the east panel of the Gosforth Cross (c. 930-50) from Cumbria, England, subverts the story of Ragnarök that the sculptor has told in the rest of the panels. The events of the other three panels show the release and attack of the monsters upon the gods. The boxed figure near the bottom of the final panel serves narratively as Oðin, but a Christian audience recognizes it better as the crucified Christ, subverting the "pagan" in favor of the Christian reading, undercutting all that the previous panels have shown. Once the "reader" has observed the transformation of Oðin to Christ, he or she may read backward, symbolically: Viðar, son of Oðin, at the top of the east panel metaphorizes Christ, and the other *götterdämmerung* images suggest those of the parallel story of the Christian Apocalypse, which for a christianizing audience interpretively replaces its pagan cousin. While the panels on the cross enumerate steps in a narrative, the other art works, while nominally static, open doorways to semiotic series—that is, their "meaning" makes sense only as they constitute pauses in narratives. They aren't still lifes, what the French call *nature mort*, because in them the world is active, not dead.

Risden

One could choose hundreds of such artworks, but for the sake of time and comparison, let's move on to a musical example, the guiding character motifs in Franz Liszt's *A Faust Symphony*. Listening to the music one will immediately notice in the first movement how the first motif establishes a character—if a dubious one—for Faust. It climbs cautiously, plunges, then climbs again, then finally creeps upward, hinting at Faust's desires and fears—and also his relative powerlessness. The second movement, which highlights the second motif, creates a gentler, more loving, but tepid theme for Gretchen; it suggests support for but ultimately a different direction for Faust—one he doesn't take. The third movement and theme embodies Mephistophilis, the center of whose theme perverts Faust's. Its quick, sawing violin strokes suggest the devil's goal to subvert or pervert Faust's course. It takes the nervous, eminently subvertable Faust theme and rushes it, almost humorously, towards an impish end. Mephistophilis as character subverts the lives of both Faust and Gretchen, but the striving for grandeur in Faust's character and the hesitant and naïve yet honest admiration (if not love) of Gretchen's emerge as the dominant musical and intellectual themes of the symphony: subverting them does not eliminate them and may even reinforce them. If those themes remain clear in our memory, ultimately subversion subverts the subverting devil.

Many film critics have noted the importance of subversion and subversiveness in the history of filmmaking. I'll take time to discuss only one clip that subverts its narrative in two interesting ways. It comes from a musical, *Singin' in the Rain* (1952). Gene Kelly's "Broadway Melody" or "Gotta Dance" sequence follows a young man with a talent and desire to pursue it who finds success, rises professionally into Broadway highbrow, but falls for an exotic woman who prefers a rich gangster, leading him to self-doubt and disillusionment. When a second young man enters, renewing the "Gotta Dance" theme, the main character realizes what truly mattered to him, that he has in fact subverted himself, and he follows the "character double," his sub-version, back to his roots as a performer and back to his true self. He regains the true narrative and thereby the adoring fans and colleagues that his misapprehensions had subverted.

Many other scenes come to mind (I'm sure for you as well as for me), one from the fascinating Alfred Hitchcock film, *Spellbound* (1945). John Ballantine, Gregory Peck's character, having lost his memory and identity, lives a life not his own; only the devoted ministrations of his psychiatrist, Dr. Constance Peterson, played by Ingrid Bergman, lead him to confront the surrealistic dream-visions that return him to the trauma that subverted his identity and his life; psychoanalysis returns him to his course through the sub-versions of his story that dream uncovers. The dream-images, designed by Salvador Dali, provide sub-versions of the amnesiac's experience that help lead him and the doctor to the true but buried experiences of his past. The two characters together must read the symbols that unravel the web of his amnesia, extricating him from the sub-version of his life that he is currently living.

You may also know the film *Sliding Doors* (1998), which follows a young woman whose future depends on whether or not she catches a train home after she's been fired from her job. If she gets home in time, she finds her boyfriend in bed with another woman; if she misses the train, she doesn't. The film then follows both versions of her future, and its crux lies in the fact that we don't know which course will lead to greater happiness in the long run. Sometimes the course of events that we assume will work better won't in the long run. Film criticism shows a good deal of interest in subversions of many sorts: cinematic, narrative, cultural, political. As a thoroughly public, deeply technological, and more visual than verbal medium, cinema provides an ideal milieu for exploring the opportunities that subversion permits.

Traditional stories, myth, folktale, religious text, also provide ample latitude for studying narrative inflections of all sorts. The assembly of the Bible presents one of the more interesting problems of narrative subversion. The canonical gospels recapitulate some elements and complement one another with respect to others—one can hardly call any one a sub-version of another, though the work as a whole has its socially subversive qualities. The problems lie not only in how we deal with narratives constructed after the fact, but also in what we term apocryphal or pseudepigraphal: there we find texts, not included in the

canon but extant, that, if we take them as serious challengers to received tradition, subvert elements of Jesus's "story."

To return to my first point, narratives have always subverted traditional patterns or have even self-subverted, often, with the exception of some kinds of genre fiction, both at once and vigorously. While examples of narrative subversion don't confine themselves to literature, literary examples abound in all historical periods. Can we begin anywhere but with that most obvious and hilarious of subverted narratives, Lawrence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, which purports to be about the life and opinions of the title character, but which moves from digression to digression upon the digression to digression upon that digression. Sterne never did get around to concluding it: he eventually dropped the project, after nine volumes, to take up another, *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy*, and then he died—the ultimate subversion—before he could get back to the earlier book, if he ever intended to finish it anyway. The novel, which critic Gerald Weales suggests is largely a satire about jackasses who intend to go on being jackasses (535), finally peters out after more than 500 pages by suggesting that the whole story is about "a cock and a bull"—but at least "one of the best of its kind that I ever heard," at once subverting and promoting the author and his work. Not properly a *narrative* at all, *Tristram Shandy* comprises an enormous series of brief proto-narratives, each subverting the next, some occasionally rewound amidst the madly stitched tapestry where subversion rules. Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* takes its protagonist, Macon "Milkman" Dead, out of his realistic world in search of a hidden treasure and more importantly the myth behind a haunting verse that purports to explain something of his family history. His story ends with that character's taking a leap of faith off a cliff and into the chasm of myth. Stream-of-consciousness novels such as Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* background narrative to internal dialogue: the minimal story serves mostly to allow the mind to stray into the widest available range of imagination and experience and to explore where they meet and mix indistinguishably. In a sense, the narrative subverts the free play of meandering consciousness. The point of view moves mostly between Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith, a shell-shocked war hero; his sub-version of her

perceptions casts a pall of madness and suffering on everyone's experience—horror lies just an unlikely and horrible turn of history away. Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and Göthe's *Faust* create a subversive pair: Marlowe's Mephistophilis subverts Faustus's quest for knowledge and some worthy pursuit, subverts his soul all the way to hell; Göthe subverts Marlowe's moral message with a Romantic philosophical notion that Faust's striving for something of value saves him not just from the devil, but also from himself, because striving for something worth accomplishing represents the highest of human endeavors. Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, despite its relative brevity, involves two plot subversions: the guest on his way to the wedding, held up by the storytelling Mariner, and the Mariner's subversion of his own life to penitential storytelling for his having needlessly killed the albatross. Among the most traveled of narrative subversions, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* famously suspends the progress of the ostensible plot—Hamlet's vengeance upon Claudius—with an insoluble philosophical problem: according to Germanic law, Hamlet must avenge his father; according to Christian law, he may not. All that happens between the appearance of the ghost and Claudius's death in the final scene comprises subversion, in this case, Hamlet's waiting for the situation to take a course where he may act, which doesn't occur until Claudius and Laertes engage their plot to kill him. *King Lear* begins with a different kind of subversion: against the law of Divine Right—and its corollary Divine Demand. Lear, chosen, we may assume, by God to rule, abdicates, divides his kingdom, and exiles the one daughter who loves him, subverting the natural order, breaking the Great Chain of Being, and allowing chaos entry into what had been a peaceable nation. And *Lear* of course has its narrative sub-version: the Gloucester subplot parallels and comments on the main plot of the King and his daughters. You will of course think of any number of your own favorite narrative subversions: literature teems with them.

Finally, now that we have some theoretical background, we can move to our medieval narratives. A funhouse of sorts, a labyrinth of tightly woven passages, medieval narrative transports us into a frightful world where monsters and Death with his sickle emerge out of dark corners, where spirits and demiurges and Otherworlds of all sorts lurk a

mis-step away. Those of you who have known me for a while would be shocked if I didn't begin with *Beowulf*, so to avoid any untoward incidents, I'll say a few words about the poem's plot and its famous "digressions." The simple plot seems to defy subversion: fight with the monster, fight with the monster's mother, fight with the dragon. But from its beginning and interspersed amidst the course of its major plot elements, the poem engages in a number of commentary digressions that, while they don't advance plot, reflect on what we need to know about the world of the story, its ideas and ideals, and they comprise nearly a majority of its lines. Of course we don't know what title its author, authors, redactors, or recorders intended for it, but we may say with little fuss that the poem deals most importantly with the hero Beowulf. Given that fairly obvious assertion, we must find interesting if not problematic that the poem doesn't mention that character until nearly line 200, and he doesn't give his name until line 343. If we know the common name or purpose of the poem before we begin reading or listening to it, it *begins* with a digression of sixty-three lines: the story of Scyld Scefing, his funeral and descendants. With the kingship of Hroðgar and the arrival of Grendel at Heorot, the nominal plot begins its course, but several significant mini-narratives intervene through the rest of the poem: Beowulf's contest with Breca; the "Lay of Finn," perhaps better called the story of Hildeburh; Hroðgar's "homily" on Heremod; the fable of Moddþrypo, the evil queen; Beowulf's long recounting of his Danish adventures to his king, Hygelac; the "Lay of the Last Survivor," which appears in a damaged section of the manuscript that may or may not originally have included the origins of the dragon; the account of Hygelac's death, which doesn't forward the nominal plot because it appears as a flashback after the poem has telescoped from Beowulf's return to Geatland and the waking of the dragon; an account of the source of the Geats' feuds with the Franks and Swedes. We end up, then, with an episodic or periodic plot rather than a linear one.

But what do the digressions accomplish? They provide useful background that helps us understand the world in which Beowulf's story occurs, and they teach morals for the poem's original audience: how to be a good king and not a bad one; how to be a good queen and

not a bad one. But I'd like to suggest that those morals also demonstrate that the digressions serve as sub-versions of the main plot. If we see Beowulf's world as foregrounding important or heroic figures on their way to sovereignty, and we see Beowulf himself, like it or not, as fated to that same course, we must ask of him as we do of the others, does he make a good king? We study such points from the main plot, too: Hroðgar shows us all the traits of a good king, enumerated in the opening Scyld story, except the ability to retain the strength to defend his kingdom—though we don't know how Scyld might have done against monsters. Hygelac, a strong king, rules well, until he blunders by over-stepping his strength and harrying against too powerful a foe: that last point comes clear in a digression rather than in the main plot. Beowulf's story of his youthful exploits against Breca shows his physical capacities, but also hints at a tendency toward recklessness; most significantly, though, it helps him win his flyting against Unferð and so gain entrance to Hroðgar's court. He will do what he must to accomplish his goals, as a hero—and sometimes a king—must. The episode shows the young hero battling monsters of the sea, a sub-version of his adult adventures. The Heremod and Modðrypo stories show the greed and vanity of bad rulers, providing sub-verse interpretations of Hygelac's and Beowulf's ends. The Hildeburh story shows that even good intentions won't often bring feuds to an easy end: that point Wiglaf clarifies at the end of the poem in his description of what lies ahead for the Geats. Unlike Hygelac, Beowulf sought peace, but attacks come (from without or within) unsought, bringing destruction with them: in this digression the Finn-battle signifies the rise of greed, pride, and enmity embodied later in the dragon. Beowulf's account of his Danish adventures serves as a sub-version of the actual adventures, adding his observations and commentary. He mentions, for instance, that Hroðgar's giving his daughter to Ingeld to end a blood feud between Danes and Heathobards won't weave the peace he hopes—the same theme as the Hildeburh/Finn story—so we know that Beowulf understands the problem. The "Last Survivor" story shows the powerful pain of loss when a people has met destruction through feuding; it may also have shown how extreme greed may turn a man into a monster: both of those

points reflect Beowulf's battle with the dragon, symbolically a battle against greed and pride, one that he wins only at the cost of his life. And unlike the "good king" models, Beowulf has not left an heir of his own bloodline, one sufficient to resist the old feuds that will arise anew in his absence, as the final digression explains. Each of those set pieces figures an element of the "good king" story against which we measure Beowulf's accomplishments. That's not a new idea in the discussion of the poem's themes, but we may see how the sub-versions structurally girding the digressions enforce the main plot and its well-rehearsed ideas. The problem is that such a theme leaves us, poor audience, in a frightening place: if even Beowulf, greatest and least power-hungry of monster-fighters, can't make much headway against human failings, how can we? For the Christian members of *Beowulf's* original audience, that question must have had an easier answer than for the pagan, a notion that may uncover, rather than a thumping good tale of our pagan forebears, the poem's real purpose.

The *Quest of the Holy Grail*, both in its French incarnation in the *Prose Lancelot* and later as the centerpiece of Malory's *Morte Darthur*, uses, oddly enough, a method of subversion akin to *Beowulf's*. First, the whole quest subverts the remainder of the narrative in which it appears, a broad, sweeping tale of great but worldly knights and their adventures. Despite their frequent masses and confessions to holy hermits, the knights of those Arthurian tales pursue worldly if sometimes laudable ideals of human conduct. Notions of the Grail don't disturb activity at the court before the quest begins, nor do memories of it impede martial or amorous pursuits thereafter. Yet because it represents the pinnacle of achievement for the Christian knight, it undermines all other adventures: they serve as merely sub-versions of its ideal, and it subverts them as soon as they stray from holy concerns. We should not feel surprised that one of Galahad's first adventures removes a demon from a churchyard grave: "Christ-as-knight," Galahad subverts the subverter, turns further under what has undermined the sacrament of Christian burial. Born as a sub-version of Lancelot, Galahad becomes a super-version, subverting his father's place as World's Greatest Knight. All other knights and all other quests become, with the rise of Galahad, secondary versions, worldly

alternatives to the ideal that dwarfs them in significance. Gawain, the most worldly of knights, becomes the first to follow Galahad on the quest, but he also fails first and worst. By taking up a quest not his own, he initiates the fall of Arthur's court that the Grail quest precipitates. Lancelot, too, is but a sub-version of his sub-version son in seeking the Grail. Greatest of earthly knights, flailing at vain hopes, he pledges repentance, to forgo his love for Guenevere, but he immediately takes up with her again upon his return to court, and the end of Arthur's reign draws near; Lancelot subverts all that Galahad had done. Even the other successful Grail knights, Perceval and Bors, are merely subversions of Galahad: their spiritual success can't match his, despite their relative purity, and it doesn't. Nor can Bors, returning, do anything to subvert—turn under or even aside—the failure of Arthur's kingdom.

Now to a quite different problem: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* incorporates a major subversion that constitutes arguably the most important element of its plot, one that itself parallels and subverts the "Descent into Hell" story so popular in both Christian story and classical epic. The knight must seek out the axe-stroke that must nominally end his life. I imagine most of Arthur's court would forgive him for not pursuing the Green Knight at all, but to fail to *attempt* would subvert his understanding of honor or *trawþe*: pledging and keeping one's word to the extent body and soul can manage. He sets out on his quest as a matter of honor, having no notion of where to find the Green Chapel and its denizen, and he has many adventures on the way to which the poet alludes with the utmost brevity—they don't matter, so at that stage they shall not subvert his purpose. But the *real* adventure of the story *does* subvert Gawain's purpose. He prays to God and Mary for help and harbor, and in a blink the Castle of Bercilak appears before him—a dubious answer to his prayer indeed, in that it provides not respite, but the sternest of tests, one far greater than the actual axe-blow of the Green Knight. The castle sequence subverts the romance narrative from its course, from Gawain's quest for the Green Chapel. His hostess offers sexual temptations, which he resists handily; she offers a ring, which he resists easily; she offers a green sash, which he fails to resist: the argument that its magic can keep him from harm

Risden

subverts his faith in himself and more importantly in God, in his belief that God will lead him aright if he remains true. By keeping the sash rather than giving it to Bercilak, and by trusting it rather than his faith, Gawain fails not the nominal quest, to reach the Green Chapel and receive the axe blow, but the actual quest, to maintain his trawpe both to his host and to God.

The whole castle episode is a "turning under" into a world of temptation and physicality. The poet vividly, tactilely describes Bercilak's hunting deer, boar, and fox and the Lady's hunting Gawain's virtue; the whole poems shimmers with vibrant detail. While she can't catch him sexually, she can catch him in his weaker spot, spiritually. She subverts his honor by putting him in a position where he must fail: according to the agreement he has made with Bercilak, Gawain must give him the sash; according to the agreement he has made with the Lady, he must not tell anyone of the sash. When the lord of the castle returns with his game and receives in exchange the kisses—the physical gifts—the moment passes in which Gawain may make a choice about whether to keep or remit the sash. By his silence he has strayed from the spiritual path, both accepting and keeping the sash without, as far as we know, questioning its validity or his choice. At that point in the story, failure is inevitable: it has already happened, and the Green Chapel episode functions merely as a formality to show Gawain his failure. The quest has subverted his sense of himself and any idea he may have harbored of attaining spiritual perfection in this life. Perhaps it has fortunately subverted any prideful belief that he *can* achieve perfection.

Though the poet describes the scene of the Green Chapel as hideous and devilish, in a green and lush sort of way, not there does Gawain undergo his descent; he finds there instead confession and truth if not perfection and honor. He learns what he must learn. Gawain's "hell" appears instead in the castle, that place of warmth and beauty and pleasure: there temptation brings about his fall. Readers may apply the same implied pun that Chaucer makes explicit with his Monk, who enjoys "venery"—ostensibly hunting, but also things venereal. As the *Beowulf* poet shows us that his hero is Christ-like but not Christ, Gawain too falls short of perfection; his rescue comes from mercy, the

Risden

Green Knight's and God's, not from of his own abilities. He is among the harrowed rather than the harrower, and he returns to Arthur the sadder and the wiser—though as we know from the traditional end of the story, it won't do him or Arthur much good in the long run, because Camelot will fall anyway.

Chaucer's Wife of Bath provides an interesting—I daresay frightening—subversive model for women in the form of a murder mystery worthy of treatment by Umberto Eco without our having to stretch to locate any hidden codes. She asserts that she'll speak of the "wo that is in marriage," and she does, but largely of her husbands' woes rather than her own. Her long prologue, full of learned, ecclesiastical citations largely (and I think we may guess intentionally) misused, argues for a woman's remarrying as many times as she wishes; while it entertains and continues to win converts, especially young feminists, in the classroom, it fails as a display of logic, subverting her purpose. Her story argues ostensibly that sovereignty in marriage should reside with the woman, but it suggests that result can apply only when the man grants it so. The wife as narrator—and someone who should know better—seems to have forgotten that the enchanted woman saves not a laudable knight, but a rapist, and even she seeks no redress for the victim. The perpetrator gets not only amnesty, but all he could ever hope for: his story ends "happily ever after," though he has done nothing to deserve it. He has capitulated, I think, largely out of weariness and confusion rather than because he has learned something of value. Thus the wife subverts her own purpose: neither men nor women do better when women have sovereignty, nor has anyone a greater likelihood of justice.

As for her own marriages, "welcome the sixte whan that evere he shal," she says, and we have no reason to believe she will end at six—she mentions "octogamy" in line thirty-three of her prologue. We do well to consider what has happened to the first five. The first three, she explains, were "good" husbands: old and rich. She got from them their estates. How did they die? She wore them out in bed, pitilessly, she explains, and not because she loved them: she committed murder by sex. What of the fourth? He died young and was apparently a "bad" husband: she loved him physically, but he had no money for her to

inherit. How did he die? She doesn't explain, but we do learn that his death didn't bother her overmuch: she had her eye on husband number five at his funeral. Number five she certainly loved physically, though at one point they fought brutally. Once he gave up the sovereignty, he must have declined and died, because she is now welcoming her sixth, perhaps with an eye on the poor Clerk of Oxenford. Another scenario appears as possible if not explicit. Did two strong, healthy young men pine and die because their wife took over the household, or, having pressed the starch out of them, did she kill them as well? What did she learn from her pilgrimage to the Holy Land? Holiness? Or did she perhaps learn the chemical arts, better known in the Middle East than in England, of disposing of unwanted company? That possibility turns a proto-feminist into a serial killer who by sex or poison thoroughly subverts any validity to her claim or her tale.

The most interesting and persistent medieval narrative subversions of all occur in *Piers Plowman*, where they help to enliven an obvious though complicated and never static allegory almost Blakean in its permutations. Most significantly, the greatest nominal subversion, the subordination of any realistic plot to the allegory, creates not an actual subversion, but a supversion—that is, the allegory dwarfs the plot to the point that it becomes not just the *raison d'être* but also the main *fable* of the work. The dreamer/narrator seeks Piers—Peter, Christ, the good, better, or best life—finds him, almost becomes him, learns what he has to teach, then must begin the search again: finders may not keep, but must begin the search again, though with greater knowledge and better experience than before. There the allegory turns both realistic and surrealistic. Even when we learn, the process of life and change doesn't end, because we continue to learn and struggle and forget, to relearn and re-experience what we've learned before—that's realistic. The dream reaches a higher level of reality than deluded, quotidian life, because, affixing us to materialistic ends, it allows access to perceptions of a higher reality than do passing, limited physical senses. We tend normally to think of dream as a subversion from the narrative of waking life, but in *Piers Plowman* the truth of dream surpasses our limitations, supverts our story to the greatest events of life: the crucifixion of Christ and the harrowing of hell, the moments of spiritual

Risden

involvement and attainment, the turns of life that in the long run have meaning and lasting importance.

The narrative subverts also in the political sense. For instance, a king must rule by Conscience and Reason and should ideally return the society to a better agrarian age, though we know, as Langland did, that no such turn would be enough and that urbanism had begun an inevitable rise, at least until the next Apocalypse. Further, the Church, fallen under the sway of worldly wealth and power, by simony and the corruption of confession and penance, had turned itself into a labyrinth of hierarchy and privilege. While the poem seeks to dismantle neither kingship nor Church, it does suggest that neither succeeds fully even at its best, that the individual must still pursue goodness and holiness, and that ruling institutions which should guide us have instead been subverted by sin and the ill choices of our forebears.

Further (here I'm working from the C-text, though the principle applies to all three versions), the story as narrative continually subverts itself: the narrator does not tell us who or what he is, but says he set out dressed in the shroud of a shepherd, as though he were an unholy hermit, hoping to hear of wonders, but on a May morning, tired from walking, as though from magic, lay down beside a stream and fell asleep and dreamed. He is neither shepherd nor hermit, and why is he so tired in the morning rather than the evening? Guilty of spiritual sloth, he finds himself in perhaps a Dantean wilderness, from which he sees a tower, a dungeon, and between them a "fair feld of folk," laborers, tradesmen, the vain, the penitent, minstrels, beggars, pilgrims, preaching Friars and a Pardoner, and priests who begged better lives from their Bishop. "Then I perceived," he says, "the power that Peter had to keep, to bind and unbind," and he comments on the presumption of Cardinals in appointing a Pope. Then follow a king and the secular powers, then a rout of rats and mice, who keep their own counsel, with one arguing convincingly that they'd better not offend the cat. By now of course we've moved to thoroughgoing allegory and satire: the worldly folk who fear the powerful may not like them, but must, at least for the present, avoid offending them. Having subverted the account of the folk for allegory, we quickly subvert even the allegory for commentary on its meaning.

Risden

The remainder of the plot involves a series of subversions and subversions that would have impressed even Lawrence Sterne. In Passus I Holy Church explains for the dreamer his vision, but with insufficient clarity or completeness for the dreamer to understand. He then enters into the ways of the world and has a vision of Lady Meed, hardly a gift, but rather the corrupting influence of money. The dreamer confesses, as do the Seven Deadly Sins, which leads the people to long for Truth, but with no clear way to seek it until Piers appears and offers to lead them if they will help him complete his plowing first. Less than entirely forgiving of their occasional sloth, Piers calls Hunger to drive them, but Truth appears to pardon those who do help, offering a partial but insufficient explanation of how to live a good life. Piers disappears, and the dreamer, wondering what all that means, begins a search for Dowel. The poem then begins anew at Passus X, and the dreamer, bewildered, searches, gradually gaining partial answers. Eventually Piers, Christ, and the Good Samaritan, representing Charity, merge into one, followed by the Crucifixion and the Harrowing of Hell: spiritual sacrifice replaces the secular "meed" and logical truths of the first part. Even after this revelation, the dreamer must still pursue Truth, and the poem concludes with the Church besieged by sin and the dreamer renewing his search for the true Christian life. Note that each subsequent stage of the narrative subverts the previous: while they all episodically represent the pursuit of truth, no stage exhibits sufficiency. The first "half" of the poem, up to Passus X, represents a sub-version of the second half, which gets the dreamer to the apocalyptic vision he needs to see, but the conclusion subverts that finding, because it isn't enough: one must not only know and believe, but also live on and continue to pursue goodness—God grants redemption, but requires our labors to accompany our faith. *Piers Plowman* subverts the notion of ends or truths: they all represent only temporary and imperfect understandings, which is why the plot shift occurs at Passus X: the number ten represents in medieval numerology the crossing of a liminal boundary from one order of existence to another, as from life to death, or in this case from partial to fuller—but still incomplete—vision. Unpierced, we must search anew, and anew, and anew. The lonely process of seeking redemption subverts, by super-verting, the equally

lonesome but destructive self-seeking that the early part of the poem satirizes.

Curiously all of these stories hint at the loneliness of the moral act and also of the person who either commits or must fix the immoral one. We get no mention in the great Anglo-Saxon epic that Beowulf has any family or friends—he mentions Hygelac as his only kin. And only Wiglaf stands with him against the dragon. He fights alone, and he rules alone, without peer or confidant. Galahad never seems to pine at being the sole perfect knight; he joys briefly in the companions with whom he completes the quest, but they long for his company more than he does for theirs. He seeks only the presence of God. So great a loneliness drives him once he has looked into the Grail that nothing can impede his desire toward a full vision of God in the death that follows. Gawain in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* meets his greatest loneliness only after he has returned alive, and therefore pretty successfully, from his quest, but no one at court understands what he's gone through, and they laugh off his failure rather than sharing its import. The Wife of Bath is lonely enough that after five husbands she still wants to marry again. And after all that Pier has said and done, at the end of *Piers Plowman* Conscience vows to begin the search for Piers anew to quell pride, and the dreamer wakes presumably to the same state in which he fell asleep: a fallen world in which the quest for goodness and holiness must remain constant and vigilant—no time for friends and family and the gentle pleasures of daily life. Literature, nearly all of it, subverts the escape and relaxation it purports to offer, enjoining us more fervently in the quest than we were before we read.

And equally good examples abound from traditions outside the English: I cite the English simply because I know them best. But in Spain, for instance, *El Libro de buen amor* abounds in subversions of all sorts: Juan Ruiz, the Archpriest, attempts to seduce all sorts of women—acts we hardly expect of him, but that remain entertaining in their bungling incongruity. Don Quixote embroils us in a sub-version of one personality (Quixano) who then subverts another (Sancho), then both suffer a sad return to less comical but somehow lesser superversions. The picaresque mode subverts a whole tradition of epic and romance with the adventures of some cunning wastrel rather than a

Risden

noble hero—but such examples must await another paper and a better scholar.

Finally, medieval narrative subversions do, as John Barth explores, pinpoint the problems of human loneliness, and they do show, as Barth thematizes with his funhouse metaphor, that “to get through expeditiously was not the point” (89). Similarly, Barth’s attention to “self-contempt” (89) appears throughout the Middle Ages, but for a different purpose: not dime-store psychoanalysis, but the typical medieval Boethian distrust of this transient life. Subversions and subversions often show the audience that self-obsession and self-aggrandizement lead to pain or horror, and Nature and human weakness will betray us not at last, but first and last. Yet they may also show that, despite our failings, the world has a place for us, and that place may allow us to do something worth doing, even if its effects are minimal and fleeting. Beyond subversion, the quest matters, whether it aims for spirituality, understanding, human connection, love, or even worldly glory—and, as Chaucer might say, “that is my conclusioun.”

St. Norbert's College

Risden

Works Cited

- Albus, Anita. *The Art of Arts: Rediscovering Painting*. Trans. Michael Robertson. Berkeley: U of California P, 2000.
- Bal, Mieke. *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. 2nd ed. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1997.
- Barth, John. "Lost in the Funhouse." 1967. *Lost in the Funhouse*. Toronto: Bantam, 1969. 69-94.
- Deimling, Barbara. "Early Renaissance Art in Florence and Italy." *The Art of the Italian Renaissance: Architecture, Sculpture, Painting, Drawing*. Ed. Rolf Toman. Köln: Könemann, 1995. 238-307.
- Genette, Gérard. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Trans. Jane E. Lewin. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1980.
- Miller, J. Hillis. "Line." In Onega and Landa. 286-95. Rpt. from *Ariadne's Thread: Story Lines*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1992.
- Onega, Susana, and José García Landa. "Introduction." *Narratology: An Introduction*. Ed. Onega and Landa. London: Longman, 1996. 1-41.
- Russell, Frank D. *Picasso's Guernica: The Labyrinth of Narrative and Vision*. Montclair, NJ: Allanheld & Schram, 1980.
- Weales, Gerald. "Afterword: Tristram Shandy's Anti-Book." 1960. Lawrence Sterne. *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. 1762, 1765. New York: NAL, 1980. 527-44.